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DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR INFORMATION SERVICE

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"SPECIAL EVENTS" ON WILDLIFE REFUGES ATTRACT MANY PARTICIPANTS

"Special events" on national wildlife refuges--those supplemental programs which have been developed on many areas because of some natural asset or local need--are attracting wide public participation and approval, John L. Farley, Director of the Fish and Wildlife Service, commented today.

Colorful and greatly varied in type are these special events. They range from religious services to "coon and 'possum" hunts with the only weapons involved a dog and the hunter's ability to climb a tree. They include public "hay rides" to feed several thousand hungry elk in midwinter, boat races, bird dog field trials, fish fries, and annual meetings of local and national organizations.

Often the events were created and developed by organizations to serve a community purpose like the Tishomingo, Oklahoma, kids' fishing derby; sometimes they began merely as routine affairs and grew into institutions like the family reunions in the Wichita Mountains.

They all happen because the national wildlife refuges are there to serve the people of the Nation--first in the protection and preservation of species of wildlife, and secondly for other public uses which are not incompatible with the primary purposes of the refuge system. The result of this policy: Last year 7,000,000 visitors enjoyed the facilities of the national wildlife refuges.

Best attended of any one of all these special events on the refuges is the Easter Sunrise Service in the Wichita Mountains of southwestern Oklahoma. Between 30,000 and 40,000 persons gather annually in the big amphitheater at the foot of Mt. Roosevelt for this event.

Only recently Easter Sunrise ceremonies were inaugurated on the Salton Sea National Wildlife Refuge in California. A total of 60,000 persons each summer season swim, dig clams, surf fish or picnic at Parker River National Wildlife Refuge in Massachusetts. There, too, is Camp Sea Haven, a summer rest and recreation spot where the child victims of infantile paralysis in Essex County have a chance to enjoy some of the good things of life.

One of the most unique events and one which attracts thousands of visitors from several States each year is the annual "pony penning" at Chincoteague, Virginia. There, on the last Thursday of July each year, horsemen from the Chincoteague Volunteer Fire Company drive wild ponies across the channel from the refuge on Assateague Island to Chincoteague Island; then the ponies are sold at public auction. This herd, descendants of horses which escaped from Spanish ships wrecked on the coast three centuries ago, totals about 150 animals. About 50 are sold each year. The property of the fire company, the ponies are kept on the refuge under a lease agreement and proceeds of the sale go to the firemen.

At the National Elk Refuge in Wyoming and at several places on the Upper Mississippi Refuge, there are some cold weather special features. Each winter at the National Elk Refuge thousands of persons ride the hay sleds on this winding route through the herds to drop hay at the feeding stations. On the Upper Mississippi Refuge, fishing through the ice is the big attraction. The communities of Minnesota City in Minnesota, and Trempealeau, La Crosse, and Prairie du Chein in Wisconsin take advantage of this sport to stage ice fishing contests.

On the Outer Banks of North Carolina, where Pea Island Refuge is located, there is held each spring a Pirates Jamboree. It attracts some 10,000 visitors from several States during its three-day span.

Another colorful event is the annual saddle club ride on the National Bison Range, staged by the Trail Riders Association. About 350 riders, in gala attire, assemble from riding clubs of western Montana for the event.

On the Minindoka Refuge in Idaho local communities stage annual fireworks displays. Colorful and well attended--but by relatively few white men--are the Stone Lake Indian Ceremonies on Burford Lake Refuge in New Mexico. Navajos, Pueblos, and Jicarilla Apaches are the spectators and participants.

It is at the Wheeler National Wildlife Refuge in northern Alabama that the special raccoon and opossum hunts are held. During the few days these hunts are on, hundreds come into the area from nearby States. The rules are simple. Each hunting party is in charge of a guide who is responsible for the dogs. No firearms are allowed and the hunts are staged at night. When the dogs tree the raccoon or the opossum the hunters have the privilege of just sitting under the tree or going up the tree after the quarry. In most instances the hunters take to the trees. As a result, about 500 raccoons and about the same number of opossums are taken annually during this event.

At Imperial Refuge in California, bass derbies are the big events. In March there are two of these, one for boys which brings together about 400 youthful contestants, and another for the girls which usually has about 40 participants. In April, the women's bass derby has about 40 contestants. In May, the men's bass derby attracts about 500 anglers.

At the Wichita Mountains Wildlife Refuge, local civic organizations stage a buffalo barbecue for the junior classmen of West Point and the officers of Fort Sill when the West Pointers make their annual trip to the Fort.

Boat racing gets attention on these areas, too. On Havasu Lake between California and Arizona on the Colorado River, more than a hundred boats participate in annual races before thousands of spectators. On Lake Lowell in Deer Flat Refuge in Idaho, a June regatta attracts boats and boatmen from Oregon, Washington, Utah, Colorado, California, Nevada, and Idaho. The Upper Mississippi Refuge and the Salt Plains National Wildlife Refuge in Oklahoma also have similar regattas.

Dog field trials are held on many refuges, and Crab Orchard Refuge in southern Illinois claims the title of the "Dog Field Trial Capital of the Nation." There annually springer spaniels, Brittany spaniels, beagles and the pointing breeds vie in several trials for regional and national championships. Trials also are held at the Sacramento Refuge in California, on Salt Plains in Oklahoma, Turnbull in Washington, and on Mingo in Missouri.

In other words, there's plenty going on at the national wildlife refuges.

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